



## Contemporary Forms of Memoir: How to Use Blogs and Zines in the Classroom

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### **ABSTRACT**

Technology is changing the ways we write memoir, and teachers can be incorporating new forms into their teaching of writing. Newer forms of memoir such as zines and blogs are also becoming part of classroom practices, and, as teachers, we must be ready to engage and support students in such endeavors. This paper addresses three topics, all of which will be meaningful to teachers. First, I will provide definitions of blogs and zines so that teachers may have a rich understanding of their functions. Second, I will explore the various, complex roles that blogs and zines play in the lives of students, and hence, in their learning. Third, I will offer several tangible examples of how to meaningfully integrate contemporary forms of memoir into everyday classroom practice, with considerable attention paid to the safety issues associated with children and adolescents using new media and technologies.

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"I hope I will be able to confide everything in you, as I have never been able to confide in anyone, and I hope you will be a great source of comfort and support." -Anne Frank (as cited in Gilligan, 2002, p. 81).

As Anne Frank closed herself off from her parents and her friend Peter, she found a significant outlet for herself in her writing by creating an imaginary friend, Kitty, in the form of a diary. Like so many children and adolescents coming of age, Anne used her literary engagements as a source of friendship as she figured out the complexities and harsh realities of growing into adult life.

As we embark on the twenty-first century, the modern day equivalent of diaries may be interpreted as blogs (weblogs). As educators exploring contemporary forms of memoir, it is imperative that we devote much-needed attention to this technologically savvy generation, in the ways they use blogs and zines (similar to magazines) in powerful and sophisticated ways to reflect on their lives. Although most adults are not nearly as media savvy as today's youth, it is our responsibility as educators to be prepared to support students in using new media, and to provide them with a safe environment within which to experiment and grow, while we learn with and from them (Editors, 2006). Today's students can broaden the tools of their time, extending ideas from their homes, to the entire world, just as Anne Frank did as her legacy.



### Introduction

Technology is changing the ways we write memoir, and teachers can be incorporating new forms into their teaching of writing. Katie Wood Ray (2006) defines memoir as “a type of autobiographical nonfiction where a writer takes a reflective stance in looking back on a particular time in his or her life” (192). Traditional forms of memoir such as literary narratives and photographic essays are important in contemporary classrooms as a way to encourage student ownership in writing and to connect to the literary history of memoir (Calkins & colleagues, 2003; Graves, 2004; K. W. Ray, 2006). However, newer forms of memoir such as zines and blogs are also becoming part of classroom practices, and as teachers, we must be ready to engage and support students in such endeavors (Borja, 2005; Cohen, 2004; J. Ray, 2006; Richardson, 2005).

In today’s test-laden educational culture, many would agree that it is essential that we challenge the narrow and artificial writing that testing mandates often produce (Romano, 2000). Sadly, the personal passions of children and adolescents are rarely the focus of today’s school curricula. Yet, we know from countless studies of literacy learning, and our own common sense, that no one can become literate, autonomous with literacy, and love literacy, without personal involvement in literacy education (e.g. Cohen, 2004). “Curriculum begins in voice... Personal and social knowing is the heart of the curriculum... To be declared a writer one not only has to know how to write but has to have something to say” (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996, pp. 50 & 54).

Writing memoir is one important way that we can write about what we value, about our passions and our lives, in a vibrant way. We cannot expect students to produce reflective writing by giving them rigid assignments. A lesson on memoir cannot be secluded from the flow of real life experiences in and outside of our classrooms. When we write memoir, we create freedom, contribute to a critical consciousness, and honor all students’ voices (Bomer & Bomer, 2001, p. 172). Sadly, the voices of children and adolescents are grossly underrepresented in our culture, and contemporary forms of memoir such as blogs and zines are significant ways to have their voices heard.

Surprisingly, there is not a lot of refereed published material on the subject of blogs and zines as new forms of memoir, especially with specific regard to the role of blogs in education, and hands-on ways for teachers to implement such media (e.g. Williams & Jacobs, 2004). There is a need for more information so that effective practice-theory bridges can be crossed, especially in the ways forms of memoir such as blogs and zines pose challenges to us as educators. In this paper, I will address three topics, all of which will be meaningful to teachers. First, I will provide definitions of blogs and zines, so that teachers may have a rich understanding of their functions. Second, I will explore the various, complex roles that blogs and zines play in the lives of students, and hence, their learning. Third, I will offer several tangible examples of how to meaningfully integrate contemporary forms of memoir into everyday classroom practice, with considerable attention paid to the safety issues associated with children and adolescents using new media and technologies

**Tabula rasa: Blogs are empty, malleable spaces, just waiting to be filled**

'Blogging' is actually a contraction of the term 'web logging,' with 'weblog' having been shortened to 'blog' and the author or weblog editor referred to as a 'blogger' (Blood, 2000). Some even refer to blogs that are educational in use as edublogs (J. Ray, 2006). Williams and Jacobs (2004) believe that blogging is best described as a form of micro-publishing. Since it is easy to use and accessible from any Internet connection, blogging has become decisively recognized as a web-based communication tool. In other words, blogs are no passing fad. Richardson (2005) reports that there is a new blog created every second, and that there are more than 900,000 posts daily, with two million blogs updated weekly. "Blogs are one of the many new disruptive technologies that are transforming the world. They are creating a richer, more dynamic, more interactive Web where participation is the rule rather than the exception. Like it or not, our classrooms and schools are about to be enveloped by these changes as well" (Richardson, 2005, p. 2).

The blogging craze has evolved from its early foundation as a medium for the publication of simple, online personal diaries, to the latest unruly technology. Blogs have the capability to engage people in collaborative activity, knowledge sharing, reflection, and debate (Hiler, 2003). Several blogs have sizeable and dedicated readerships, and blog clusters have formed, linking fellow bloggers in relationship to their mutual interests (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). According to Blood (2000), the original weblogs, which emerged in 1998, were link-driven sites, each a fusion in unique proportions of links, commentary, and personal thoughts and essays, with dated entries, listed in a reverse chronological format. However, since 1999, with the launching of the free, do-it-yourself blogging website *Blogger.com*, blogs have exploded as a sort of short-form journal. "These blogs, often updated several times a day, were instead a record of the blogger's thoughts... a quick reflection on some subject or another" (Blood, 2000, p. 3). While these new blogs were similar to their predecessors, they differed in some important ways.

Today's blogs allow a more creative response from the author, fostering a freer flowing, creative and contextualized discussion that is more like a conversation (Instone, 2005). It is a form of public conversation, and it can be fascinating to see how bloggers position themselves in their new blogging communities (Blood, 2000). So, why did we experience this blogging explosion? "With a click, *Blogger* will post the... whatever... on the writer's website, archive it in the proper place, and present the writer with another empty box, just waiting to be filled... an infinitely malleable format" (Blood, 2000, p. 4). A tabula rasa, indeed, with countless possibilities for educators!

**Zines: Not your average magazine**

The world of zines (rhyming with spleens) has a rich history, with its derivation coming from the words 'magazine' and 'fanzine.' Although definitions of the word vary significantly, most publications that refer to themselves as zines have many characteristics in common. For example, most zines are: self-published, with a small print-run and low budget, reach outside of the mainstream, and are usually motivated by the ability to express oneself rather than to make money (Freedman, 2005). A zine is essentially a publication containing a selection of writing pieces designed to appeal to



and inform a particular audience. Despite the fact that zines began as a somewhat underground form of publication, today many people of all ages engage in these self-published periodicals, since zines allow people to write for wholly personal reasons, to share their knowledge with a small community of readers (Cohen, 2004).

Those less familiar with zines often ask what distinguishes a zine from a blog, or from other more traditional forms of classroom publishing. For teachers, one major strength of a zine is that it provides students with the opportunity to extensively explore a single topic about which they feel passionately, by writing across several genres (Cohen, 2004). Zines are often more classroom-friendly than blogs because there is no need for any special equipment or knowledge, and as a result, they are less expensive, and, in essence, more portable, since there is not an absolute need for computers or an Internet connection. One aspect of zines that may be interpreted as having both downfalls and benefits, is that they are finished products, whereas blogs have the capability of constantly changing, and tend to foster more interaction (Freedman, 2005).

### **Voice and space: The complex roles of blogs and zines in students' lives**

"Like all human activity, literacy is essentially social, and it is located in the interaction between people" (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 3). By articulating and sharing insights about contemporary forms of memoir, such as blogs and zines, it is my intention to inspire educators to empower students to critically reflect on their literacies, and to create learning environments more conducive to the relational dimensions of knowledge construction (Vygotsky, 1978). In reconceptualizing the relations between literacies and the societies in which they operate, we can potentially glean keener insights to more effectively educate people. Blogs and zines have several dimensions that are conducive to students' voices, empowering them, and supporting them to become more critical and analytical in their thinking (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). By producing a memoir in a blog or zine format, students may develop and nurture a unique writing voice, formulating and standing by their opinions, while acknowledging and considering the views of others. Ideally, a blog or zine author will "become less reflexive and more reflective, and find his own opinions and ideas worthy of serious consideration" (Blood, 2000, p. 6).

"What I'm most attracted to in web logs is the empowerment of the student voice... Many of our students... don't often feel like they're heard. And here they have a tool that gets them noticed," reflects Mr. Clausen, a K-12 teacher in Montana (Borja, 2005). Likewise, in a piece entitled 'A Young Blogger Finds the World Waiting to Listen,' eleven year-old Dylan Verdi remarked that she, too, feels very positive when she shares her experiences of being a middle-class kid in New York on her blog. "(It's like somebody else cares about what I have to say" (Editors, 2006, p. 100). Indeed, well-known blogger Rebecca Blood (2000) insists that she discovered aspects of herself by engaging in blogs that she otherwise may not have known. "First, I discovered my own interests... More importantly, I began to value more highly my own point of view... I began to feel that my perspective was unique and important" (p. 5).

In the worlds of zines and blogs, everyone is an author, which provides students with an incomparable sense of audience and purpose. This is even further heightened in



blogs, which are interactive. By writing their own stories, and reflecting on the stories of others, students may engage in a journey of self-discovery and intellectual independence. It is no secret that many students do not like to write. Yet, when engaged in exciting opportunities like blogs and zines, possibilities are endless, and enthusiasms are sparked. Mr. Clausen's 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> graders in Montana "were spilling out their thoughts on an assignment both to him and their classmates" (Borja, 2005, p. 1). Even the previously sullen and quiet students were passionately sharing their stories in this interactive, online conversation hosted via *The Digital Life*, their class blog.

In her graduate-level literacy methods course for teachers in New York, Professor Cohen (2004) created the Zine Project as a way for teachers to find their own writing voices. By asking teachers to author their own zines, about any topic about which they felt passionately, Cohen found that the teachers' zines served as a prototype for a classroom writing project that could be adapted for students at any grade level. Cohen's Zine Project encouraged the teacher-authors to write with a personal focus, while Cohen provided a clearly defined format, and emphasized that the teachers would publish for a real audience. At the conclusion of the Zine Project, Cohen reflected, "If these adult students could write with passion and sensitivity about the important things in their lives, wouldn't it be wonderful if we could accomplish this same thing with children in the elementary school?" (p. 136). Indeed, that is precisely what happened. Cohen found that some of her graduate students did, in fact, go into their elementary school classrooms and shared their zines with their own students, thus inspiring a string of zines across grade levels. As one of Cohen's graduate students, also a second grade teacher, so eloquently put it:

I learned that anything is possible when you write from the heart! I was surprised at how my ideas and words seemed to flow naturally. Writing about what you know and love is what real writing is all about. I shared my zine with my own students and they were so excited and impressed to see my writing. I hope to help them discover their passions and their unique writing voices as I did (Cohen, 2004, p. 137).

In addition to fostering voice, blogs and zines are also obviously a marked space to author one's self into the world in a meaningful fashion. Writing memoir through the media of blogs and zines can create a palpable, cohesive classroom community. The space provided by a blog or zine can provide a sense of belonging. Since blogs and zines are published to an audience of some sort, authors know they will go under some degree of peer review. When handled effectively by teachers, this can be a powerful conduit for autonomy and community in authors. The freedom of both the writer's self-expression and readers' responses provides writers with a trusted space to feel a cooperative spirit.

In learning, we take constant risks, and to take risks, we must feel safe. Indeed, Dewey (1916) contended that meaningful learning must take place in community, in cooperation and interaction with others. He illustrated that in community, students have freedom and support to explore curiosities, and can also use that sense of community as a springboard into eventual independence. Blogs and zines are a wonderful way to approach this type of pedagogy.



### **Taking the plunge... and is it safe?: Practical suggestions for classroom practice**

Blogs are powerful tools in a deceptively simple form (Hardy, 2005). While establishing a blog is easy, using it effectively, and in a way that enhances learning, can be more complicated (Borja, 2005). Many would argue, however, that the blog's benefits outweigh its concerns. In this section, I will explore both the multitude of exciting approaches to using blogs, as well as the ways of addressing online safety.

#### *Blogs are Non-linear Webs of Information*

When teaching with blogs, remember that perhaps their greatest benefit is that they are essentially non-linear webs of information. Their possibilities are endless, which is both exhilarating and overwhelming. When it is new, try to start small, simply exploring with colors, layout, and some graphics, which can provide a sense of autonomy and online identity (Hardy, 2005). Cristina Runkles, a third grade teacher in Maryland, has maintained her edublog for three years, and she loves the non-linear web it offers her students (J. Ray, 2006). Runkles asks her students to explore various geometry websites, and then requires them to post comments on the edublogs, explaining what they learned.

#### *Blogs Are Collaborative*

Of the educators who do use blogs, most immediately cite the inherent collaboration as the best part. For example, at Richardson's (2005) school, blogs are used as collaborative spaces where students, teachers, and guests can co-construct content. Whether his students are communicating with students in foreign countries, or with the authors of books they have just read, they "create meaningful content for audiences wider than just a teacher and a small group of peers. In the process, they learn to negotiate meaning and knowledge in real and relevant ways, preparing them for the connected world they will find once they graduate" (p. 1). Richardson's students have engaged in such stimulating projects as communicating with Pulitzer Prize winning authors, and Holocaust studies with students in Poland. It quite simply brings their curriculum to life. In these ways, blogs foster diverse perspectives and bloggers can be linked into blog communities (Hardy, 2005). Of course, it is not just students who can collaborate! Teachers can also use blogs to collaborate with fellow educators to share curriculum or professional development (J. Ray, 2006).

#### *Blogs Foster Communication*

Blogs are obviously communication tools, so perhaps their greatest benefit is the pathway of communication they create. Some teachers think of their blogs as electronic bulletin boards (J. Ray, 2006). Teachers can showcase, publish, and forever preserve students' work effortlessly on a blog. There is no denying the sense of pride and ownership that comes with publishing. The blog publishing could then naturally lend itself to authentic writing mini-lessons, especially since there is a meaningful audience and purpose in mind. Some teachers even use simple software to publish photographs of students' various learning initiatives and field trips for parents to enjoy. Likewise,



teachers can use blogs as a way to maintain communication with parents, especially to avoid the hassles of schedules, reminders, and homework hurdles.

### *The Functionality and Format of Blogs*

Since blogs are structured in specific ways, they can be a useful tool for teachers. For example, since blogs are organized by date, they can be used to see various types of change over time, such as students' writing, interests, and other such qualities that teachers need to assess in an on-going fashion (Oravec, 2003). In addition, blogs can actually help to minimize plagiarism because the discussions are open and are linked directly to the students' classroom audience (Oravec, 2002). Furthermore, the linking that is common in blogging can help scaffold learners by steering them towards relevant and safe sources of information (pre-selected by the teacher), which organizes their browsing experience (Oravec, 2003). When students create their own links, meaningful lessons can arise in how the link does or does not provide rich context to their writing, and it can also be a further lesson in avoiding plagiarism, since they cannot repost what someone else has already said (Oravec, 2002).

### *Safety Issues and Pitfalls to Avoid*

As educators, if we would like blogging initiatives to be successful in our classrooms, we must be bloggers ourselves. It is unfair and unrealistic to ask our students to engage in such technologies if we are not experiencing them ourselves (Hardy, 2005). This requires a commitment of time and purpose. Blogs that are infrequently updated and boring are not successful. If an author is blogging and receives no feedback, his or her interest will rapidly wane (Hardy, 2005).

Blogs that are used for any purpose, but especially for memoir writing, contain sensitive information which must be handled responsibly by teachers. While there is no denying the risk that online sharing involves, we can keep our students safe with thoughtful teaching and clear policies (Richardson, 2005). Blogs can be set to varying levels of privacy and anonymity, which enable personal journaling capabilities (Hardy, 2005). Students and teachers can decide together what to share, and what to keep private.

It is also relatively easy to bypass certain adult blogs with a school's surf-filtering software. Blog activity can and should be additionally monitored to discourage inappropriate language, or to ensure there are no "intruders" making inappropriate comments. Of course, while we want to encourage free expression in our young memoir writers, we also want to be sure that they are not revealing too much personal information, such as contact information, which could be potentially dangerous. Again, teachers should be thoughtful about what to make public, and what to keep on a safe, private website.

A great suggestion is to have your school district host your class blog, as opposed to a third party website; this way, school officials can maintain proper oversight, and students will not be able to post an inappropriate comment on a class blog outside of school hours (Borja, 2005). "Districts can download blogging software, such as *Movable Type*, on their servers, and teachers can control who reads and comments on a blog through sites geared to education" (p. 3). Finally, teachers can always consult "Kids'



Rules for Online Safety” established by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, which protects children from online predators, harassment, bullying, and more (J. Ray, 2006).

In conclusion, the planning and care required to set up safe blogging and zine sites to extend classroom literacy interchanges seem to be well worth it. Memoir writing is far too valuable an educational tool, not to explore new ways and formats for it. It is our responsibility as educators to scaffold students as they traverse this complex new terrain.

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